



Charles Blondin was a world-renowned tightrope artist and acrobat. On June 30, 1859, before a stunned crowd of thousands of excited onlookers, Blondin was the first person to cross Niagara Falls by tightrope. He crossed 1,100 feet on a single three-inch hemp cord, strung 160 feet above the falls on one side to a spot 270 feet above the falls on the other. The breathless assembly watched him accomplish, step by slow step, a feat most believed impossible.

But Blondin was just getting started. In the years to come, the daring entertainer crossed again and again.....seventeen times: on stilts, in a sack, even pushing a wheelbarrow! The story goes that an exuberant onlooker called out, "You could cross with a man in that wheelbarrow!" Blondin agreed and invited the man to climb in. The spectator nervously declined.

Being invited to hop in the wheelbarrow.....

My brothers in community are aware of my favorite quote from Fr. d'Alzon, one that I often repeat because I feel that better than any other it goes to the heart of what made him tick, captures what gave meaning to his life. It comes from a letter he wrote to a good friend, Alphonse de Vigniamont in 1835, just three months after his ordination:

"My dear friend,

The most intimate thought of my soul is that the world needs to be penetrated through and through by a Christian idea; otherwise it will fall apart. And the world will not receive this idea but from those who will be taken up with it before all else in order to proclaim it in every form that it might assume....in words that the world can understand."

This excerpt would deserve treatment much longer than a brief homily can provide --- of penetrating the world with a Christian idea, one; two, doing so in words the world can understand. But today I would like to focus on the third element, "the world will not receive this idea but from those who will be taken up with it before all else"...that is to say, those accepting the invitation to climb into the wheelbarrow.

And d'Alzon definitely climbed into the wheelbarrow. One need only reflect for a moment how much he sacrificed to follow Christ: the genteel and privileged life offered at the magnificent chateau at Lavagnac; the guaranteed prestige and power in French society in a career that his family ties would have easily and surely occasioned; and the respect of so many friends discouraging him from entering the priesthood.

The gospel passage we just read offers us another opportunity to reflect on the cost of discipleship, the story of Zacchaeus. "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." But of all people to save, Jesus could have certainly found someone more appealing than Zacchaeus. After all, he was hardly the most loved person in Jericho ... regarded as nothing more than a money-grubbing, tax-collecting creep, a spiritual, moral, and physical runt.

What would possess such a man to want to see Jesus anyway? What would possess such a man to ignore the hateful and scornful glances of those who knew him, to forget whatever dignity he had by scampering up a sycamore tree? Is it possible that only some sightseeing curiosity would induce him to take such a risk?

HARDLY! There must have been something else...something much more powerful at work in Zacchaeus' heart that day. Could it be that Zacchaeus wanted to overcome his self-imposed loneliness with the help of someone he had heard reached out to others like himself? Could it have been a half-formed determination to have done with a profession that had become burdensome to his conscience? Could it have been that Zacchaeus had returned to his heart and found it empty? In a moment of lonely truth, did he wonder if Jesus might not provide the

remedy for his sick soul? Who knows? But one thing is for sure: Zacchaeus could have never imagined Jesus' response, could have never imagined that Jesus wanted to see him even more than he wanted to see Jesus. The moment Jesus caught sight of him in the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus' life changed radically; Jesus awakened in him impulses that had lain dormant for years. Jesus revealed to him the man he was capable of becoming. Zacchaeus entered the wheelbarrow...

Isn't it a wonder how Jesus deals with the lost ---- to women caught in adultery, to backsliding friends, to criminals hanging on a tree, and even to unscrupulous tax-collectors? And why? Augustine writes that our misery puts his mercy into action. "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." Could it be that Jesus came to restore people to that place where they ought to be with God, to that place in themselves they so often lose in the midst of their suffering and busyness and sinning?

Zacchaeus' response was a dramatic and comprehensive demonstration of his gratitude. His story is our story as well....none of us, wherever we may be in life, should ever suppose that God is done with us. Jesus' surprises, as d'Alzon learned, did not end with the little guy in the sycamore tree. Are we, like him and Zacchaeus, ready to enter the wheelbarrow?

By Fr. John Franck, A.A.